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ABSTRACT

A study examined the attitudes of Aboriginal students concerning their education and their perceptions of their parents' views of education. Questionnaires completed by 473 Aboriginal students in grades 6-10 from 22 urban and rural schools in Western Australia indicated that Aboriginal children had a positive attitude toward their schools and their education. They enjoyed their schooling, did not wish to absent themselves from school, and wished to continue their schooling through high school and beyond. The majority reported that they knew what they wanted to do when they left school and had the ability to stay on at school, but did not feel that their teachers encouraged them to stay on at school. They also believed their parents were supportive of their present and future educational aspirations. Although 82 percent of students reported respecting their teachers, a significant percentage reported that their teachers picked on them at school, did not always help them, and did not understand them. The percentage of students who experienced relationship problems with their teachers indicates that many teachers of Aboriginal students are unfamiliar with or ignore the characteristics of effective teachers of Aboriginal children that have been recognized for two decades. It is suggested that classroom practices informed by deficit logic result in lower teacher expectations, and that the development of close teacher-student relationships is necessary for the transmission of knowledge. Appendices present age of respondents, parent attitudes toward education, student attitudes toward absenteeism, and student perceptions of teacher attitudes. (Contains 14 references.) (TD)

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ATTITUDES OF ABORIGINAL STUDENTS TO FURTHER EDUCATION: AN OVERVIEW OF A QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY.

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98 Abstracts

by

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Edith Cowan University

Perth

A paper presented at the

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INTRODUCTION

This paper highlights the attitudes of Aboriginal students to schooling. In particular the paper examines the perceptions of Aboriginal middle school children (Year 6 to 10) to continuing their education and their perceptions of their parents views of education. The results reported in the paper are a broad overview of a rich source of a section of the data gathered with a survey from a large sample of Aboriginal students.

Four hundred and seventy three Aboriginal students from rural and urban areas in Western Australia responded to a questionnaire survey which identified their attitudes to number of educational factors and their educational needs. The students surveyed were in classes which ranged from Year 6 to Year 10. The ages of the students ranged from 10 years to 17 years. The questionnaire of 73 items consisted primarily of Likert scale items.

Literature Review

Participation of Aboriginal parents in education has always been seen as a major issue in education. All to often the cry is that Aboriginal parents are not interested in their children's education, to date a review of literature shows that in fact this is not the case. Aboriginal parents are interested and see themselves as having a major role in their children's education .Phillips (1990) points out that Aboriginal parents are interested and they see that there is a need for their

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involvement in their children's education. She goes on to state that Aboriginal and Islander students are at an educational disadvantage compared to non-Aboriginal students and that this educational disadvantage is obviously brought by the student to the classroom. According to Phillips the disadvantage is linked to the home related factors such as cultural and economical situation that exist within their environment and there is also the outside social factors such as discrimination they are confronted with on a daily basis. Phillips notes that the home related factors is due to the low level of education of the Aboriginal and Islander parent, which results in Aboriginal children having less exposure to books and other literacy materials in the home and also the parents lack of education and skills to assist their children with homework, this compared to non-Aboriginal parents whose background is more conditioned as they are more exposed to education. Aboriginal parents are disadvantaged and lack confidence to approach teachers about their children's education this is due to their lack of education and also their own prior experience at school. This also reflects past policies that have impacted upon Aboriginal peoples and left with a legacy of being disadvantaged that they feel they are not able to participate in or at any level of education.

McIntyre and Clark (1976) also note that parental involvement is imperative, as parent involvement would play a would have an impact on students behaviour, attitudes, and aspirations. McIntyre and Clark (1976) go to say that in regard to parent involvement there is a need to;

- increase parents' aspirations and raise awareness in education,
- increase knowledge in education,
- increase understanding of the structure and function of education institutions,
- increase awareness of the progress and participation of the child,
- increase involvement and improve participation between the school and the parents.

Wilkinson (1987) states that Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islander peoples are not interested in the long term achievements, however they are more interested in achieving short term immediate happiness for their child compared to non-Aboriginals and that Aboriginal and Islander parents may view children in a way that could be correlated with how others view property to an extent that if their child is lent to the school then the teacher or school should be responsible for providing all the students needs for that period: food, transport, materials, etc. Wilkinson goes on to point out that parents may extend the loan to include extra-curricular activities but with the extended loan comes extended responsibilities. Wilkinson states that if this perception is correct then the teachers need not feel that they are doing a parents job or being evangelistic about education by taking on parents responsibilities, but are simply accommodating the parents views of the roles.

However in the case of absenteeism Aboriginal parents have a powerful right to withdraw their children where the reasons may not be sufficient for a non-Aboriginal parent. Wilkinson notes that there are legitimate reasons for absenteeism, these could be that of a funeral or death within the family or a family member may be gravely ill, cultural or indeed other obligation beyond their control such as lack of clothing or equipment (books etc) which would make the student feel embarrassed (shame). Wilkinson view is that parents would rather their child be dressed appropriately and have the appropriate equipment rather than send them to school to face humiliation (shame). He also argues that home factors are connected to outside community factors, such as prejudice against Aboriginal people and low expectations of them to succeed in education and they were not encouraged to remain at school prior to the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET) (now the Department of Education, Employment, Training, and Youth Affairs) established an affirmative action policy in the last decade. The aim of this policy was to improve the retention rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to stay on at school and to encourage them to gain tertiary entry.

The Department of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) have funded programs in an attempt to make up for the educational disadvantage. A few of these program have been extended to parents, to encourage them to take a greater participation in their children's education for example the Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness Program (ASSPA) which was introduced several years ago, allows Aboriginal parents to become involved and participate in decision making at the school level. It is run similar to that of the Parents and Citizens or Parent and Friends committee.

This is also the view of Harris (1989) who notes that Aboriginal culture and Western culture consist of two different world views. He states that the context of these two fundamentally different world view, see Aboriginals in formal schooling facing a major dilemma. He points out that while most Aboriginal parents have a deep desire for their children to grow up 'Aboriginal', they also want their children to succeed in Western schooling and to perform successfully in some aspects of white culture, there by reducing dependency on white expertise in their communities. He goes on to say that being 'Aboriginal' involves retaining an Aboriginal world view: doing, thinking and believing in Aboriginal ways (being Aboriginal is not just external it is also internal). However Aboriginal parents want their children to be successful in the higher levels of non-Aboriginal culture these roles involves some 'un-Aboriginal' ways of going about things. How can Aboriginal students be successful in schooling without losing their Aboriginal ways of believing and thinking? Harris (1989) by having Aboriginal parents involved in their children's education would be seen as empowering the parents and the Aboriginal students.

Eckerman (1985) points out that there needs to be a partnership between the school and the parents and community. As the school must also be prepared to be involved and encourage parents to become involved. Schools cannot expect parents, any parents, to feel comfortable in schools unless they have a role, a function, a purpose. If the school cannot see a purpose, or if that purpose is to simply work in the tuckshop, then we can't complain if there is only limited involvement. There must be a common agreement, a shared knowledge base, as well as clearly established recognition that each group brings valuable, expert knowledge to the sharing process. Avenues must be developed so that Aboriginal parents and teachers can begin to work on co-operative projects In some school relations, community involvement is a process rather than a project. It takes time and the process can easily be threatened by school staff changes, particularly changes in executive staff.

Saggers (1998) claims that the attitudes of parents towards formal education, encouraged their children to attend school, even though they themselves had no formal education. They believed that by gaining an education would lead to material rewards and status within the wider community. However Saggers' (1998) findings suggest that their awareness of what and how the schooling system operated were rather limited. This group of people also expressed views that education should incorporate some knowledge of Aboriginal culture as some of the men had participated in the special projects such as making traditional artefacts. They viewed this as being a small step in the right direction by integrating Aboriginal culture into the curriculum although they were vague on what elements of Aboriginal culture could be incorporated. However on the other hand there was also the thought amongst some of the group that some of the younger people who had accepted the values and beliefs acquired through the education system have drifted away from the group. The group acknowledged the importance of education within the wider society but also recognised that there were factors other than education involved in 'getting on' in the world. Parents recognised that there was a need for their children to acquire some basic education but the attitude that they themselves had survived with no more than a minimum was often passed on to the children.

It is the view of Bin-Salik (1990) that the overall purpose of the mission style education was not to allow the integration of Aboriginal people into Australian society as Aboriginals were taught little more than basic literacy and numeracy skills. The policies of assimilation and integration did not deny Aboriginal Australians participation in Australian schools, However the missions and reserves were geographically isolated, preventing equal participation and benefit from ,mainstream education. Since the rise of political Aboriginal activist groups put pressure upon the

government to make changes in areas such as education and health which was declared a national priority. In 1970 tertiary support units were established and educational outcomes for Aboriginal became a focus. However even with these changes and the growing concern within the Aboriginal communities that their issues in relation to prior policies imposed upon be heard and told accurately and that it also be recognised as being part of Australian history. The prior policies introduced particularly in the area of education has seen little changes for Aboriginals students with the mainstream system. Although new intentionally more sensitive, accountable policy directions towards self-determination, together with the more general commitment to equal opportunity and multi-culturalism over the last twenty years or so, the extent and pace of change has been neither sufficient nor reliable.

METHOD

Sample

Schools

A range of students and schools were surveyed from the Perth metropolitan area and non-metropolitan areas of Western Australia with a questionnaire containing questions designed to gain the views and attitudes of Aboriginal students to various aspects of their education. Twenty two schools were surveyed. Ten of these schools were primary schools; three metropolitan primary schools and seven non-metropolitan primary schools. Twelve of the schools were secondary schools; six metropolitan secondary schools and six non-metropolitan secondary schools. The schools were chosen for the survey on the basis of the number of Aboriginal children enrolled in the school and the willingness of the school to allow these students to participate in the research. A mix metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools were chosen to ensure a wide spectrum of views was obtained from Aboriginal children.

Students

A total of four hundred and seventy three students were surveyed within the period of a calendar month. Two hundred and nineteen of the total were males (46%) and two hundred and fifty two were females (53%). Two students did not respond to this question on the survey.

Age

The subjects are Year 6 to Year 10 students. The age range of the students surveyed is between ten years and seventeen years. However over 85% of the subjects are aged 11 to 15 years (see Appendix A). The average age of the respondents was thirteen years and five months with the majority of the respondents between the ages of twelve to fifteen years (Standard deviation: 1.7 years).

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of seventy three items, sixty two (85%) were closed items with fifty nine (81%) of these being a four point Likert scale consisting of responses strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree. The items formed six variables; absenteeism, reasons for absenteeism, educational aspiration, attitude to school behaviour management and attitude to school atmosphere. The absenteeism variable consisted of seven Likert scale items relating to this variable, the reasons for absenteeism variable consisted of fourteen questions, the educational aspirations variable consisted of twelve questions, the attitude to school behaviour management variable consisted of eleven questions and the attitude to school atmosphere variable consisted of seventeen questions. The variation in the number of questions chosen for each variable was an attempt to ensure that most aspects of the variable were covered by the questionnaire.

Pilot Study

Two schools with a sample of 19 secondary and 10 primary students was chosen on the basis of convenience to conduct a pilot study. An analysis using the Cronbach Alpha reliability index with this small sample indicated that the questionnaire was highly reliable (0.95). The discrimination indices of the items varied between 0.23 and 0.82 with the exception of 3 items which produced low indices in the range of 0.09 to 0.11. Some items were rewritten, one was rejected on the basis of these statistics. Notwithstanding the low discriminations of a few items these statistics indicated that the questionnaire was suitable to be used with the proposed larger sample of 400 to 500 respondents.

DATA ANALYSIS

A number of statistical analyses were performed on the data to check the reliability of the instrument, the discrimination of the items and the perceptions of the subjects on the items and variables.

Cronbach Alpha calculation

The Cronbach Alpha is a measure of reliability of total score of items. This procedure measures the internal consistency of the item scores. The analysis of the data using the Cronbach Alpha reliability index was performed with the use of the Ed Stats computer program (Knibb, 1995; 1996).

Discrimination Indices

With the use of the Ed Stats computer program the student scores on the items were correlated with the total scores of the students on the questionnaire (less the score on the particular item) to find an indication of the discrimination of the item. The item discrimination value therefore indicates that there is a correlation between the values for a particular item and the totals on the other items. Discrimination values below 0.3 indicate that there is a weak correlation between the item values and the totals of the other items.

Frequency counts

After the data was checked for reliability and discrimination it was analysed using frequency count percentages to gain an overview of the attitudes of these Aboriginal middle school students to their educational experiences. The analysis of the frequency count of student responses on the four points of the Likert scale was over particular items and various subsets of items. Means and standard deviations were also examined to assist with the interpretation of the frequencies.

RESULTS

Cronbach Alpha calculation

The Cronbach Alpha calculation produced a reliability co-efficient of 0.93. This statistic indicates that the questionnaire is highly internally reliable as a measure of attitude to schooling by Aboriginal children. An analysis of the questionnaire indicated that it is also highly reliable within its sub sections. Cronbach Alpha reliability co-efficient for various subsets of items were also calculated, these range from 0.61 to 0.84.

The Cronbach Alpha reliability co-efficients are estimates of internal consistency of the instrument. The majority of the co-efficients obtained are within the limits indicated by Griffin and Nix (1991); "two types of reliability are appropriate for attitude scales ... internal consistency and stability. Internal consistency estimates how well the items act together to elicit a consistent type of response from the respondent. ... Estimates can be well above 0.85 for scales with a few as 10 items and even higher for longer scales." (p. 58)

Discrimination Indices

Items with a discrimination index below 0.3 were closely examined and considered for elimination from the analysis. After an examination of the discrimination indices and carefully considering the intent of the question it became apparent that a further six items needed to be reversed scored by strongly agree, for example, being given a response of four instead of one.

Frequency counts

After these preliminary investigations of the structure of the instrument the frequency counts and percentages on the various variables of the questionnaire were analysed. The first variable examined was the variable of 'Absenting themselves from school'. This variable included items such as "Attend school regularly". The variable produced highly positive reactions from the respondents with the strongly agree and agree points of the Likert scale averaging 73 percent. The item "Attend school regularly" evoked a 85 percent agree-strongly agree response. The students indicated that they were not absent from school regularly. This indicates that Aboriginal children are opposed to absenting themselves from school, they are anti-absenteeism and they do not regularly stay away from school. The frequencies on the items show that they attend school regularly (85%); never miss school (58%); don't like missing school (66%); and they look forward to school (70%). In short the nine items in relation to absenteeism showed that Aboriginal students felt strongly about school and attended school on a regular basis.

These findings support the view of Wilkinson (1987) that while Aboriginal parents the right to withdraw their children from school for reasons that are legitimate their children are usually not absent from school without their parents knowledge.

Aboriginal students responded highly positively to the 6 items in the variable "desire an education". In regard to staying away from school (78%) of those students surveyed on a four point Likert scale strongly disagreed-disagreed that they stayed away from school because they weren't successful at school; 64% of students strongly disagreed-disagreed that they weren't encouraged by their parents to attend and succeed at school. Students surveyed believed they were made to feel welcome at school. These results indicate that Aboriginal children and their parents are not unhappy with the schools their children attend.

The variable labeled 'parents support an education'. There were ten item in relation to this variable which produced highly positive reactions from the respondents with the strongly agree and agree points of the Likert scale averaging 73%. The item "I hope to stay at school until end of year 12' evoked a strong positive response (84%). The items 'I want to get as much education as I can' and 'My family wants me to get a good education' gained very strong response rates of 94% and 98% respectively. Also the other items such as 'I know what I want to do when I leave school' (73%) and 'I have the ability to stay on at school' (85%) gained high average positive responses. But the item 'My teacher(s) encourage me to stay on at school' gained a low response in comparison of 66%.

These results indicate that Aboriginal children have a positive attitude to their schools and their education. In fact they enjoy their schooling, they do not wish to absent themselves from school and wish to continue their schooling to Year 12 and beyond. They also believe their parents are supportive of their present and future educational aspirations. However on those items that relate to their teachers they are less positive (see Appendix). The 'attitude to teachers' questions which are interspersed throughout the questionnaire reveal a pattern of responses not as positive as the other areas of student attitude to schools and their education. For example on the subset of nine questions regarding their attitude to their teachers the average strongly agree-agree respond is 70%. However this average positive response is buoyed by the high response (82%) on the student attitude to teacher question 'I respect my teachers'. Forty two percent of students do not like their teacher, 37% strongly disagree-disagree that 'my teacher cares what happens to me', and 39% strongly disagree-disagree that 'most teachers at this school care about me'. A number of the respondents strongly agree-agree that 'teacher(s) pick on me at school' (20%) and that 'the teachers gang up on me' (12%). Larger percentages of respondents (37%) indicated that they

strongly disagree-disagree that their teachers encouraged them to continue their education and 27% report that they strongly disagree-disagree that teachers always help them and understands them.

In contrast to these negative response rates a high response on a student attitude to the question "I respect my teachers" (82%) was obtained.

IMPLICATIONS

The major aim of this paper is to analyse the attitudes of Aboriginal students to schools, their perceptions of their educational experiences and teachers and their parents' views. An overview analysis of the responses on the 59 Likert scale items of a questionnaire by 473 Aboriginal children presents implications for Aboriginal education. The paper reports these Aboriginal students responded highly positively on a number of significant features in regard to their attitudes to schooling. The majority of students have positive attitudes to school. They wish to remain at school till Year 12 and to gain further education. They feel welcome at school and do not wish to absent themselves from school. They believe their parents support them in their present and future educational aspirations.

While the majority of students have a positive relationship with their teachers and respect their teachers the percentage of students who experience relationship problems with their teachers appear high. The results in this area should disturb educators for as argued in the literature review section of this paper researchers for two decades have emphasised the Fanshawe (1976) teacher characteristics as critical to the education of Aboriginal children. Some teachers of Aboriginal students appear to be unfamiliar with these personal characteristics of an effective teacher of Aboriginal children or chose to ignore them.

The percentage of children who specify that their teacher encourages them to continue their education indicates that classroom teachers appear to have low expectations of the educational aspirations of Aboriginal students. Aboriginal students perceive these teacher attitudes, the attitudes are not unnoticed, they do not exist in a vacuum having no effect. As noted above Munns (1998) argues that teachers must reject deficit explanations for student dissatisfaction. When he claims that classroom practices are underpinned with deficit logic, it is almost certainly results in lower teacher expectations and restricted academic demands on the most needy students. If teachers are unable to form warm relationships with those students, the transmission of knowledge, which is the foundation of schooling, will not occur and teachers will be wasting their time. Munns (1998) warns that; "it was found that the development of close personal relationships that were founded on shared cultural empathy would not necessarily translate to enhanced educational outcomes ... relationships had to be formed at both a personal and a pedagogical level in order to make an educational difference" (p. 184).

CONCLUSION

Twenty years on Aboriginal parents still recognise education as being important and want their children to succeed in all avenues of education. Aboriginal also see the need for them to become more involved in decision making in all levels of education. Empowerment, self-determination and equality and participation are all of the things that Aboriginal parents want and have been asking for. This has been the cry of Aboriginal people for far too long is it too much to ask for and feel empowered, or the right in determining what is good and what is not good for our children and our people. Are we equal with every other Australian? When will Indigenous people see and feel equality? Why is that Aboriginal people are not participating in all levels of education is it because we are seen as just token Aboriginal within the mainstream of education or are we already empowered. Where is the self-determination and at what level are we allowed to participate. Is the policies and programs that are currently in place doing all of the above. Education is a powerful tool to have and Aboriginal want their children to succeed in education.

Policies can sometimes be like a wheel on a bike when it gets flat we pump it, when it gets a

puncture we patch it up and it just keeps on going around and around, maybe there is a need to change the tyres altogether and stop doing patch up jobs.

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Appendix A

Percentile Chart of Age of Respondents

Age	Frequency	Percentage	Percentile
17	15	3	100
16	34	8	97
15	78	16	89
14	100	22	73
13	98	21	51
12	60	13	30
11	67	14	17
10	14	3	3

Appendix B

PARENTAL ATITUDES TO EDUCATION:

		SA		A		D		SD
9.	I like the teacher.	9		33		40		18
13.	I get into trouble from my parents if I stay away.	33		31		27		9
57.	My parents are welcome at school.	28		60		10		2
30.	My family wants me to get a good education.	71		27		2		0
21..	I have family responsibilities.	9		27		38		26
22.	I am not encouraged by my parents.	7		8		31		54
65	My family likes this school.	26		58		14		2

Appendix B

STUDENT ATTITUDES TO ABSENTEEISM

		SD		D		A		SA
1.	Attend school regularly.	2		13		41		44
3.R	Miss a lot of school.	46		36		14		4
4.R	Usually miss the same days.	48		34		13		5
5.	Don't like missing school.	9		25		41		25
6.	If I had a choice I would not	33		37		17		25
	attend school.							
7.R	Look forward to school.	8		22		47		23

Appendix C

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHER ATTITUDES

		SA		A		D		SD
9.	I like the teacher	9		33		40		18
59.	My teacher cares what happens to me.	17		46		29		8
60.	My teacher(s) always helps me.	20		53		22		5
33	My teacher(s) encourages me to stay on at school	25		41		24		10